

THE  
ARMY OF THE NORTH  
GERMAN CONFEDERATION

A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF  
ITS ORGANIZATION, OF THE DIFFERENT  
BRANCHES OF THE SERVICE AND THEIR *RÔLE* IN WAR,  
OF ITS MODE OF FIGHTING, ETC. ETC.  
BY A PRUSSIAN GENERAL

*TRANSLATED FROM THE CORRECTED EDITION  
BY PERMISSION OF THE AUTHOR*

BY

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## TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE.

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AT THE PRESENT MOMENT, when the events of 1870 and 1871 are fresh in our memories, it is natural that the causes which have led to the unprecedented successes of German arms should become the earnest study of military men, and that we should endeavour to seek out special points which have contributed to them, and which may be applied with advantage to ourselves.

Without referring to the splendid organization of the North German Army and the perfection of arrangement by which every portion is held ready for mobilization in case of a sudden declaration of war, perhaps the lesson which most immediately concerns ourselves is the change which modern fire-arms has rendered necessary in the tactics of Infantry. A skirmishing system of fighting must in future take the place of close line formations. The *Company Column of the Prussians* (their tactical unit) appears to offer the greatest advantages for this description of fighting; and the success of their Infantry in the last campaign has in great measure been attributed to the *relations existing between the company officers and their men*. It is to the practical application of these two subjects to ourselves that the following remarks will be confined:—

I. The Prussian Company Column is composed of 3 Züge (or 6 half-Züge, according to the strength of the Battalion), and there are 4 Companies in a Battalion. Our own Battalions are usually divided into 8 Companies, therefore 2 Companies in

column of half-Companies would for all practical purposes answer the same object as the Prussian Company Column. These Columns would be commanded by the four senior captains, and would offer the readiest means of developing lines of skirmishers (the only way in which it is now possible to advance under fire); of keeping the skirmishers in hand; of pushing forward reinforcements; of assaulting any points in the enemy's line where he appears to be shaken by bringing up the closed supports into the centre of the skirmishers, and with them making a rush upon the position; and finally the column chief is able rapidly to restore order and bring his men into hand after the assault.

For opposing an attack on the flank, one of these small columns can be quickly brought to the front to outflank the enemy; or, to resist a turning movement, the deep formation of the Prussian Battalion in order of battle (or, in other words, the distance at which the supports and reserve are kept in rear of the skirmishers) offers the means of developing a strong line of skirmishers to the flank in a very short space of time.

The order of battle for Battalions in the front line, which, since the experience gained in the last wars, has become the normal formation in the German Army, is as follows:—The two centre Companies, in Company columns, are in the first instance united as a reserve; the flank Companies (in column) are pushed forward 150 paces; from these columns the skirmishers and supports are thrown to the front; the latter 100 paces in front of the columns, the skirmishers 150 paces in front of the supports; consequently the distance of the reserve from the line of skirmishers in field-exercises is 400 paces.

It may not, however, be out of place here to quote a passage from their present drill book<sup>1</sup>:—‘The rules given form the

<sup>1</sup> The date of the drill-book (August 3, 1870) may lead to the supposition that it does not contain the alterations made since the last war. This, however, is not the case; the changes made were only completed by the King when he was on the point of taking the field; and this edition was not printed and issued until several months after the conclusion of peace. The original date was intentionally kept, and bears testimony to the insight and penetration of the Soldier King, who had already

foundation and guide for instruction . . . . The formations laid down are only examples for the most simple situations, and require modification in their employment. The co-operation of other arms, the ground, and the measures taken by the enemy, render them conditional ; and the Brigade commanders, as well as all field officers, must be practised in adapting their arrangements quickly and without hesitation to the situation of the moment. Their attention must never be diverted from the essential by retaining appointed forms.'

Such a formation could be easily adopted by the front battalions in our Brigades ; it has stood the test of many fields of battle, and would necessitate no alteration in the present constitution of our Battalion, or indeed in our drill-book, which contains all that is necessary so far as detail is concerned. It would, of course, be necessary, as at present, to name a Battalion of direction, and the skirmishers of the directing Battalion would be conformed to by the others.

II. In order, however, to carry out effectually a system of fighting in skirmishing order, it is of the utmost importance that the men should be instructed by their own Company officers. Great stress is laid upon this in the Prussian Army. Our author says that 'the Company officers occupy themselves almost continually with their men . . . . The soldier has confidence in his officer, and the officer knows that he can depend upon his soldiers.'

The drill instruction of the small columns described above, under the four senior captains, would be far more interesting and useful in the field, both to officers and men, than Battalion drill. The captains would be able to give the individual men far more practice and instruction in skirmishing than would be possible, in the same time, in Battalion. They would render

determined upon the alterations in the tactics of his Infantry which the introduction of breech-loading rifles had rendered necessary. And great additional importance is given to this circumstance from the very fact that the experiences of the last great war—in which for the first time breech-loading rifles were opposed to arms of a similar description—have in no way affected his previous decisions in this matter.

these columns so handy that they could deploy with the greatest rapidity in any direction and in any kind of inverted order, without the slightest confusion ; and by this means a Battalion would be able to take up a new position far more quickly than at present—the columns would move by the shortest way, and deploy as they came up.

Such a system of instruction would be invaluable for the auxiliary forces. The short time allowed for the training of the militia would be far more profitably spent if each Battalion had four efficient captains who could drill and instruct the men, and who would command the four small columns in the field. The Battalions, many of which are under thoroughly efficient commanding officers, would then in a very short time be able to take their places in Brigades.

In the Volunteer force we have excellent material for skirmishers. The intelligence which prevails to a great extent among the rank and file would be of great service in this kind of fighting ; but unless the Battalions are kept well in hand, and good discipline exists in the Companies, it would be impossible to place any reliance on this force. Therefore competent column chiefs are necessary, who can give instruction to their columns whenever a couple of even small Companies can be assembled for drill.

But to return to the regular Army. It must not be supposed that the more independent action of these small columns would lead to the breaking-up of the Battalion cohesion. It is most important that this should be maintained, and in the Prussian instructions such a result is carefully guarded against. It is an evil which presented itself in 1866 ; but measures are now taken to prevent it. There is, however, no doubt that far greater weight now rests upon the subordinate officers and the individual men, than was the case in close fighting formations. But with the high tone and spirit of our officers, there need be no fear lest they should not prove themselves equal to the occasion. It is upon the Infantry Company officers that the brunt of the battle falls ;

their conduct decides for victory or defeat. The most perfect generalship and highest strategy are useless, unless the Company officers, and the men whom they lead, respond to the demands made upon them. With regard to these men, we may be sure that, when carefully instructed by efficient officers, the same qualities which in former days gained renown for the 'thin red line,' will in these days furnish us with an infantry of skirmishers at least equal to that of any army in the world.

The following passage from an interesting German publication,<sup>1</sup> which has recently appeared, and attained much notoriety, bears especially upon this subject:—'In 1866, when the military forces of Austria were destroyed in seven days' fighting, there was much talk of superior generalship, of the intelligence of the masses, and of the Prussian schoolmaster, and to all of these thanks are due;—but of the officers' corps from the captain downwards only secondary mention was made; and yet it is these officers above all, who not only conduct the instruction, but who also bring about the tactical decision in action.

It is well known that the Company Column and the swarm of skirmishers are now the effectual fighting formations of the day; and in carrying out an obstinately kindled infantry action, the superior officers are able to contribute, comparatively, but little.

Thus even after 1870, very much was said of the general staff—and rightly. But very little was said of our front officers, and that wrongly.

'These are the real schoolmasters who led forward their Companies and troops upon the battle-field, and set a seal to their efficiency by the sacrifice of life and limb.'

<sup>1</sup> *Bildung und Mannszucht im Deutschen Heere.* Mittler u. Sohn.



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